

Johnston, R.M.

Significance of Bull Run.

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The Significance of Bull Run

By R. M. JOHNSTON

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The Significance of Bull Run.

By Professor R. M. Johnston.*

THE United States have never suffered one of those great military reverses, like Jena or Sedan, that shake the foundations of national existence, that modify national thought, and that generations later still bring a blush to the face and a qualm to the heart of the lover of his country. Bull Run has been, as yet, our nearest approach to anything of the kind. It was more discreditable to us than Jena was to Prussia, than Sedan was to France, and it revealed dangers commensurate with those which those two disasters revealed; but it was a family affair, it was an incident in a political program, and it did not bring ruin to the state. Steadily minimized by all who were responsible for it, and not understood by the general public, it was quickly set aside as one of the disagreeable family occurrences about which the least said is the soonest mended.

But to turn over once more the reports of those who fought there, to jog along the Warrenton turnpike where the fugitives scurried in mad retreat under the spur of Kemper's shells, to reconnoiter the fords of that ditch-like stream that cost McDowell so many efforts to cross, all this makes one's mind vividly alive to the hideous mistakes, the wanton throwing away of human life, all the military inefficiency and political ineptitude that marked the first battle of the Civil War. Let us see how its significance may fairly be estimated as we look back upon it at the present day.

What in military terms was the value of those two armies of 30,000 men each that met at Bull Run: as to mobility; the higher command; staff; organization; discipline and cohesion; matériel; tactics? The percentage of efficiency under each one of these heads was extraordinarily low, under some of them almost nil. In other words, a small force, properly efficient in every respect, say one brigade with one battery, under a general

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trained to maneuver a brigade, could have done almost anything it pleased on the field of Bull Run. Such, at all events, is the impression that a study of the battle creates.

Assuming this or something like it to have been the case, an important deduction inevitably follows. When the Civil War broke out, the so-called army of the United States amounted to less than 17,000 men. These troops were dispersed, a company here and a company there, mostly in the Western territories, holding distant outposts against the Indians and policing the plains. In fact, for purposes of war, there was then, very much as to-day, no army; all the regular infantry that could be scraped together for McDowell, on three months' notice, amounting to two battalions only. Of these one consisted of three hundred marines who were enlisted on the 1st of July and sent into battle twenty days later. Napoleon in his most furious moments would have hesitated at spilling blood and spoiling regiments in such a way as that!

Have we ever sufficiently considered what would have happened in 1861 had the United States possessed not a bloated military establishment but a little army in the real sense of the word, say 60,000 to 100,000 men? In the latter case it is clear that we would have possessed a safe and cheap insurance against a civil war, against the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives, against the loss of hundreds of millions of property, against economic depression, almost bankruptcy, against what some modern writers argue was an actual reduction of the national vitality. For with 100,000 men enrolled, it is probable that from 25,000 to 30,000 regulars could have been collected with some promptness and sent to Richmond, to New Orleans, and to such other southern cities where conditions seemed most dangerous. Any seditious tendencies would have been stamped out long before effective military resistance could have been organized. With a total of no more than 60,000 men, this might not have been possible, but at all events the administration would have been able to give McDowell a division of 8,000 to 10,000 regulars; and that might have made of Bull Run and of the Civil War a very different story.

That McDowell ever succeeded in marching his army twenty-five miles to Centreville, and that he was then able to throw its right wing another ten miles around the Confederate left at Stone bridge, the most commonplace of maneuvers for an efficient army, stands out as the one striking achievement of the whole cam-

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paign. Although several of his regiments faced considerable losses and behaved creditably, it is no exaggeration to say that, as a whole, his infantry was wretched. How could it be otherwise with the men three months or less enrolled, with the regimental officers mostly elected and so inefficient or cowardly that, when the 12th New York broke under the first Confederate volley at Blackburn's Ford, it was not possible to find a single officer to rally the men. There were some brave officers among the volunteers, of course, but even those who stuck to their work were not for that reason valuable; witness the Michigan major who on being ordered into the woods with his battalion adopted the square formation so as to run no chances with the enemy's cavalry!

When that infantry was first deployed against Evans' line north of the Warrenton pike, Burnside's brigade, although strongly supported by artillery, remained hopelessly stuck for over an hour at from 500 to 600 yards of a line of about 800 muskets. It was so used up by this experience, that when the enemy was eventually driven off by artillery fire, Burnside's men promptly retired into the woods "to replenish ammunition," and remained there comfortably during the rest of the day. If this could happen at 500 or 600 yards, it can be realized how hard a question Jackson asked the brigades of Porter, Franklin, and Wilcox when he planted his line of guns and muskets at only half that distance behind the crest of the Henry hill.

With such an army and such a problem there was apparently only one thing to do. The infantry could not fulfil its normal rôle for lack of offensive power. The artillery, therefore, must perform the infantry's part. That was why those two gallant batteries of regulars, Griffin's and Ricketts', notwithstanding the protests of their commanders, were thrust straight out at the Confederate line on the Henry hill, to plough a hole through if the thing could be done. The thing could not be done, however, for a master of tactics stood in the way like a stone wall, in a beautifully judged position; and what happened was that a single volley from the 33d Virginia mowed down the horses and men of the two batteries so that they never fired another shot. And things require, especially under modern conditions, more careful why was all this? Why were all these wrong things done, all these good lives thrown away? Because the United States did not carry out the simple and fundamental duty of maintaining a

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properly equipped and instructed army of not less than 60,000 men.

In all the maze of technical complexities that go to make up an efficient military organization, perhaps the most delicate and critical in its adjustment is that of the higher command. Few things require, especially under modern conditions, more careful preparation and more practise. Needless to say that McDowell's army suffered severely in this respect. Some of the incidents that have come down to us are almost more grotesque than pitiful. Thus on the very afternoon that McDowell had, after a thousand efforts, got his army fairly started on its march to Centreville, we find him hurrying back in person to Washington to hang about the platforms of the station enquiring for a couple of batteries of artillery that had gone astray. Two days later he is starting on an important reconnaissance, but his adjutant general and his chief engineer are both more interested in going off in another direction, and so leave their general to his own devices. The orders of McDowell, of his staff, of his divisional and brigade commanders, are all given with confusion, promiscuously. There is no proper staff system so that at the critical moment no orders reach the troops, or else orders are issued by anybody who is minded to do so, even by civilians like that energetic person, Governor Sprague of Rhode Island. Chaos and the paralyzing of an army's action could go no further.

Organization was non-existent or defective. On the very morning of the battle, Beauregard became conscious that his army, which was merely divided into brigades, could never be handled without a divisional or even a corps grouping, so he suddenly started scattering into the order he was dictating to Major Whiting the word "division," as though the word could create the thing! That order is a curiosity in military history; it is probably one of the worst that was ever written by a commanding general—which is saying a good deal. The Federal army was, on paper, better off than the Confederate, in that it had a divisional organization; but Bull Run was to prove how much theoretical knowledge and practical experience are necessary to make such an organization work.

Our army at the present day, when we consider the problems that may be set before it, is relatively little larger than that of 1861. A wave of uninformed and sentimental pacifism tends, quite illogically, to keep its numbers down to the danger point, and below. Nothing seems so difficult nowadays as to get people

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to keep their heads and not go to extremes; and it really becomes a question whether a Prussian Junker or a Californian pacifist is the greater danger to civilization. European countries arm millions of men whom they could never employ in active operations, and create a condition of international nightmare; while we prefer to remain unarmed and not to insure against disaster, trusting to our size, to our geographical situation and to sheer luck. Yet with an army deliberately kept unfit to go anywhere or do anything, the lurid unwisdom of our press, and the haste and irresponsibility of our masses may plunge us almost any day into a formidable conflict. We happily do not require millions of soldiers. We have shown in the present phase of our history that, as nations go, we are reluctant to conquer, averse to annexation. Yet we have military problems of all sorts confronting us, as some of us realize; and the pity of it all is that many of them would cease to be problems were we able to mobilize at short notice no greater field force than 150,000 regulars, scientifically organized and commanded. As it is, something even worse than Bull Run may be our lot when we are next called on to face the military ordeal. Its responsibility will not lie at the door of our soldiers, any more than that for the first great defeat of the Civil War lay at the door of McDowell and the handful of gallant officers who tried so hard with him to achieve the impossible.

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